

To: Professors Dr. Schwartz & Steph Fellows

From: Nicholas Osterbur

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RE: Diffusion of Innovations Book Report – Everett M. Rogers

Diffusion of Innovations is a social/scientific study of how adoption of new ideas and technology propagate through social systems. In essence, it is a study of social change as it applies to the context of a social system's risk aversion, norms, values and structures as well as the individuals and organizations within it.

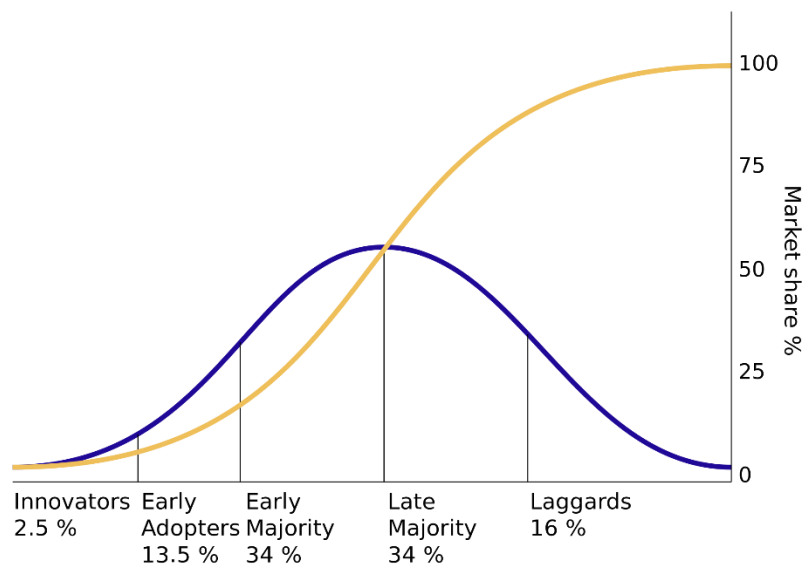
Rogers defines diffusion as communication of innovation ("new" ideas, methods, or objects) over time and through social structures, many of which are technologies. Innovation may be good or bad (cell phones vs. cigarettes) and not necessarily technology based (Marxism). Technology is defined as having two components, hardware and software, with hardware being the "object" and "software" being the information or ideas that define how the object operates (computers being a literal example). Innovation has five characteristics – relative advantage (is it more useful than status quo?), compatibility (does it fit contextually/culturally), complexity (easy or hard to learn?), trialability (can you try bite-sized/low risk and scale up?), and observability (is it flashy/visible to your neighbor?). Additionally, innovation is subject to re-invention/evolution as adopters always look to customize innovation to their specific needs.

Rogers goes on to illustrate the mechanisms of idea transmission including various communication channels – mass media seeds the idea and further information dissemination usually comes from like-minded peers (i.e. farmers trust other farmers' opinions more than an outsider's). Time is a key element of diffusion as assessment of an innovation occurs over a five step process – knowledge, persuasion, decision, implementation, and confirmation which leads to adoption or rejection, all of which are self-described. Rogers goes on to describe five types of adopter personalities – innovators (2.5%), early adopters (13.5%), early majority (34%), late majority (34%), and laggards (16%). Rogers notes that not all adopter types will be the same type depending on the innovation being assessed and uses the Amish people as an example

(they reject modern things entirely but quickly adopt innovations as they fit with their lifestyle, another lesson in context). This formula creates a given rate of adoption which is the relative speed at which portions of the population adopt innovation. This speed is described as an S curve (see Fig. 1) where the first third(ish) of adopters act much more quickly than the last half.

Finally, diffusion occurs within a social system which has norms, values and structures (likened to a circulatory system). Opinion leaders exist (mavens) that have social capital in the form of respected opinion status assuming they don't spend their good word too often as they must represent the structural norm to some degree. Adoption is decided in three ways, by individuals, collectively, or by authority and adoption or rejection ultimately leads to consequences for individuals and society.

Diffusion of Innovations is a useful study and has potential application for products as well as social problem solving methodology. It clearly demonstrates that social and individual context/norms/values matter in the adoption of ideas and technology and that a serious social entrepreneur would take such a concept seriously in order to have the greatest impact on the problems that he or she is focusing on.



As retrieved 11/16/14:

http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/1/11/Diffusion_of_ideas.svg/2000px-Diffusion_of_ideas.svg.png